Experiences of residing in Moscow (1986–1993) while translating Russian literature into Gujarati

By Shruti Shah

Those were turbulent yet enjoyable years. My husband Rajiv (Shah) left for Moscow at the end of January 1986. He was appointed as a correspondent for the left-leaning newspaper Patriot and the weekly Link, both run by freedom fighter Aruna Asaf Ali. At the end of February, he had to attend as a journalist and report on the high-level Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in the presence of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. At that time, I worked as a librarian in a government school in Delhi and my daughter Hina was one and a half years old. Before leaving, Rajiv assured me with confidence that I would get my visa to Russia. That was all.

At the beginning of April 1986, I landed in Moscow with my daughter Hina. After coming out of airport security, Rajiv and one of his student friends, Gautam Sarkar, were there to receive us.

Rajiv had brought warm clothes for us; after putting them on, we got into a taxi amid melting snow. In Moscow, snow starts accumulating from November and does not melt completely before May. I had never imagined so much snow even in my dreams.

Passing through deserted suburbs, we reached the Patriot flat, in the heart of the city after around an hour and a half. It was allotted to the newspaper by the Soviet government. Unlike flats occupied by foreigners inside foreigner enclaves, ours was in a Russian neighbourhood—on the bank of the small river Yauza, three kilometres from the Kremlin. The address was: 52 Ulitsa Chkalova (Ulitsa means street; Chkalov was a famous Russian aviator of the 1930s).

The flat on the fifth floor had three bedrooms and a living room. By Russian standards, it was reasonably comfortable and quite large.

Rajiv converted one of the rooms into an office. At that time, neither of us knew Russian. So we would go shopping carrying a small English-Russian dictionary and try to explain to shopkeepers what we needed.

The biggest advantage of being a Patriot correspondent was that officials of the Soviet propaganda organisation APN (Agenstva Pechati Novosti) were always ready to help its correspondents. Very few Indians lived there at the time. Some of them told me that Raduga, a publishing house translating Soviet literature into foreign languages, was looking for a Gujarati translator. Rajiv contacted the APN officials who in turn contacted Raduga.

Raduga published Soviet literature in foreign languages. Progress Publishers (Pragati Prakashan in Gujarati), whose Gujarati translator was Atul Savani, published mainly books by Marx, Engels and Lenin favoured by the Soviet leadership.

Among Raduga's Russian staff, there were three people who knew a little Gujarati. They gave me English-to-Gujarati work first. I did it easily, and my name was immediately approved. Thus, in less than three months after reaching Moscow, I began translating Russian literature.

To teach me Russian, Raduga appointed a teacher: Yelena Vladimirovna. She was a retired professor from Moscow's Peoples' University and a scholar of Russian and French. She did not know English,

Gujarati was out of the question. Her teaching style was through gestures, pictures and identifying everyday objects in Russian. This informal method suited me very well and I learned quickly.

Soon I started reading literature in Russian and conversing with Russians in their language. Shopping also became easier. Most staff in Russian stores were women; they were delighted to see an Indian woman and her little daughter and helped us choose things. Greeting them with “Zdravstvuyte” (Namaste), I would ask for what I wanted. To my surprise, many daily-use items were not available. They would apologetically say, “Izvinite, eto nyet” (This item is not here). Many vegetables were unavailable for eight months of the year, so when available, we bought them in bulk and stored them in the freezer. Only onions, potatoes, cabbage and apples were almost always available, though even those had to be chosen carefully.

It took me around six months to translate directly from Russian into Gujarati. I began by translating children’s books. Yelena often invited me home for lessons and treated me to excellent homemade Russian dishes including wine. When she came to our flat, I served her spicy Gujarati tea. Laughing, she would say, “This is as strong as vodka.”

Even more than that, the person who helped me the most in learning Russian language and culture was Lyudmila Vasilevna. She was Raduga’s Gujarati editor. Eager to improve her Gujarati, she often came to our home and invited us to hers, speaking freely in Gujarati while I learned Russian from her. She had spent time in Gujarat Vidyapith in Ahmedabad, where everyone called her Lyudmilaben. She helped us get our daughter Hina admitted to a nearby nursery (crèche), and later to an English school. Hina loved both places. She settled in from her second day at the crèche, and refused to come home when we went to pick her up. She learned art and music there, interests that she retains to this day. She still plays and teaches the violin. Her first language was neither Gujarati nor English—it was Russian.

Lyudmilaben was so generous that she stayed with us whenever there was a medical issue and phoned doctors if needed. She truly became a family member.

There were very few Gujaratis in Moscow then. We jokingly said, “There are only two and a half Gujarati families in Moscow.” Rajiv and I were the “complete Gujarati” family. Then there was translator Atul Savani of Progress Publishers. His love for Gujarat and Gujarati was remarkable. He strongly favoured mixing Persian and Sanskrit elements freely in Gujarati translation. His wife was Kudsiyaben. Their flat was about 30 kilometres from ours in a fourteen-storey apartment complex in the southwestern suburb called Yugo-Zapadnaya, where most Indians of Progress and Raduga lived. We could reach their home by metro in less than an hour.

The other “complete Gujarati” family was close by—the family of Dhananjay Vyas of Ahmedabad, who worked for Radio Moscow. They returned to India a few months after our arrival. They were replaced by Chandrakant Vyas, who also returned quickly.

Apart from Gujarati families, Rajiv mostly interacted with Russian officials, scholars and Indian diplomats. Russian officials and scholars frequently attended small gatherings at our place along with Indian journalists working for other agencies—Surendra Kumar, K.P.S. Gupta, Vinay Kumar, V.S. Karnik. Russians enjoyed Indian food. Like my teacher, they loved our “vodka-strong” spiced tea.

I worked as a Russian translator for nearly six years. We had no choice but to spend all the ruble earnings inside Russia because they could not be converted into any other currency. At that time, everything, including essential services, was extremely cheap. So we spent most of our earnings

travelling around snowy Moscow in winter and going to restaurants. The other advantage was that we travelled to Europe three times by train—once via Germany to London and twice to Sweden.

Regarding my translation work: I spent most of my time learning Russian. I went with my editor and teacher to Russian films, plays, operas, ballets and other cultural events; this greatly helped me understand society and culture, which in turn helped my translation.

Initially I translated from English—Gogol's plays and Chekhov's short stories. Soon I began translating directly from Russian with a Russian-English dictionary, as no Russian-Gujarati dictionary existed then.

Besides editor Lyudmilaben, Natsya and Sasha worked on producing my translations. I would hand in a written draft, Natsya copied it in larger characters—though she did not know Gujarati. That copy was then edited and printed. First proofs were edited by Sasha and Lyudmilaben, final proofs came to me.

My last translated book was Zhivi i Pomni (Remember and Live), by a top environmentalist and award-winning author from Irkutsk in Siberia. It never got published. Along with it, I translated contemporary Russian short stories directly from Russian because no English translations were available. Translating classics like Gogol, Chekhov and Tolstoy directly from Russian was difficult, but English versions existed, which helped.

During my tenure, I translated around thirty books—children's books, novellas and novels. Raduga published about twenty. The remaining became unpublished when the Gujarati division shut down. All were published in my maiden name, Shruti Mehta. I have print copies of five unpublished works; other copies were reportedly discarded. In 1992, I had planned to translate a novel by Dagestan's famous poet Rasul Gamzatov, but it did not materialise. Rajiv has scanned my surviving published and unpublished books and uploaded them on the blog https://saankal.blogspot.com/, where they can be downloaded.

My Gujarati work in Moscow was not limited to Raduga. I also worked for some time as a Gujarati newsreader at Radio Moscow. There I met a Russian woman, Lyubov Viktorovna, who claimed to know Gujarati. She knew only a little, but translated news into Gujarati and broadcast it. I am sure Russians did not care about the translation quality. I was given a pass to enter the Radio Moscow building freely.

Lyubov Viktorovna seemed close to those in power. She decided to create a Russian-Gujarati dictionary—perhaps to impress her bosses. A draft reached me and also Chandrakant Vyas for evaluation. My report was sharply critical. It had spelling and many other errors. For example, "lakadi" was printed as "lakari", because Russian lacks the letter "d" and uses "r". The whole dictionary was full of such mistakes. I wrote that it should not be published without proper corrections. Even so, it was printed unchanged. No one cared about quality. "Something is better than nothing" seemed to prevail. Such was the indifference as the Soviet Union collapsed.

Besides this, I voiced Gujarati versions of Soviet documentary films for six months and helped Lyudmilaben translate from Gujarati to Russian. With Russian friends, I often went to see Hindi films in theatres—all dubbed in Russian. I remember watching Prem Rog; old women in the audience cried at the tragic scenes, which amazed me. My friends would ask, "Do boys and girls in India really sing and dance when they fall in love?" They loved Raj Kapoor and Mithun Chakraborty films and eagerly went to see them. Many people knew the song Mera Joota Hai Japani by heart.

My time at Raduga was very enjoyable. Translators of many Indian languages worked there and at Progress. We often went for picnics together. We interacted a lot at Raduga parties. Often, the staff was taken on week-long excursions. Lyudmilaben herself took me to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and Kyiv

(now capital of war-torn Ukraine). In Leningrad we stayed at her mother's flat; in Kyiv, with a local family for six days. One day they took me to a cave filled with the bodies of ancient saints. They believed that holy souls prevent bodies from decaying.

In 1991, during the infamous August coup aimed at overthrowing Gorbachev, I was working at Raduga. When my son Ankur was born, I received medical care in a prestigious maternity hospital—entirely free. The subsequent period was full of political upheaval. There were severe shortages of essentials including bread. We had to stand in long lines to buy milk. Special stores for children stocked baby food for Ankur, but quantities were limited and we had to collect it daily. I often went shopping while Rajiv cared for the children. Hina was in school and Ankur was at home. I would return after visiting many shops, pulling a trolley laden with about fifteen kilos of necessities. Our home did not change but its address did: Ulitsa Chkalova reverted to its old name, Zimlyanoi Val.

After the fall of the Soviet Union and Raduga, we returned in April 1993. Amid the chaos, the publishing house helped pack our belongings and paid for tickets for the whole family including little Ankur. The time spent in Russia, through its highs and lows, remains unforgettable for me.

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